

Conjunctivitis

Last Revised: 12/19/2001

Conjunctivitis (aka, Pink Eye)

Last Revised: 10/2000

Conjunctivitis (aka, Pink Eye)

Conjunctivitis is an infection of the eyes commonly known as "pink eye". Conjunctivitis can be purulent or nonpurulent. It is most often caused by a virus (like those which cause the common cold), but can also be caused by bacteria, allergies or chemicals. The conjunctiva-the clear layer over the whites of the eyes - becomes pink and there may be tearing and discharge from the eyes. Eyes may be itchy or even painful. In the morning, the discharge may make the eyelids stick together. Conjunctivitis is a mild illness. Viral conjunctivitis will go away by itself in one to three weeks.

Who gets this disease?

Anyone can get it. Conjunctivitis caused by a virus or bacterium is highly contagious. Preschoolers and school-age children have it most often and can spread it to people taking care of them or to each other.

How is it spread?

Both viral and bacterial conjunctivitis spread by contact with discharge from the eye. Children often pass it along by rubbing their eyes and getting discharge on their hands and then:

1. Touching another child's eyes.
2. Touching another child's hands. The second child then touches his/her eyes.
3. Touching an object. Another child touches the object and then puts her hands into her eyes.
4. Staff washing, drying or wiping a child's face and then using the same washcloth/towel/paper towel/tissue on another child's face can also pass it along. Staff could also get eye discharge on their hands when wiping a child's eyes and then pass it along as outlined above.

The incubation period varies according to the type of virus or bacterium involved: Bacterial 24-72 hours, Viral 12 hours to 12 days.

How is it diagnosed and treated?

Signs and symptoms of purulent conjunctivitis are white or colored discharge from the eye, eye redness, eyelid swelling, and eye pain and sometimes fever. It is often difficult to tell if the cause is bacterial or viral. Occasionally the doctor will examine the discharge under the microscope or culture it. Often an antibiotic eye medicine will be given because treatment of bacterial conjunctivitis shortens the length of symptoms and decreases infectiousness. There is no treatment for viral conjunctivitis; it will go away by itself but may last a week or more.

Signs and symptoms of nonpurulent conjunctivitis are clear watery discharge from the eye, without eye redness or pain and fever. Children with nonpurulent conjunctivitis do not need to be excluded from child care.

How can the spread of this disease be prevented?

1. Follow hand washing and center cleanliness guidelines previously outlined. Keep children's eyes wiped free of discharge.
2. Always use disposable tissues/towel for wiping and washing. Never use the same tissue/towel for more than one child.
3. **Always wash your hands after wiping a child's eyes.**
4. Dispose of tissues/towels in a lined, covered container kept away from food and child care materials.
5. Teach children to wash their hands after wiping their eyes.
6. Be sure articles that may touch children's eyes (e.g. binoculars, prisms, toy cameras) are washed well with soap and water at least once daily.

Who should be excluded?

It is recommended that children and staff with purulent conjunctivitis be excluded from child care until examined by a *healthcare provider* and approved for re-admission, with or without treatment.

Reportable? Not usually, but conjunctivitis caused by the bacterium **Chlamydia** is reportable by New Hampshire law.